

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 30, 2012

The Mills on Red Clay Creek (Part 1): E. I. du Pont de Nemours, founder of the gunpowder works along the Brandywine in 1802, made a study a few years later of the water-powered mills on Red Clay Creek and its tributaries. He discovered that there were 30 mills then operating. I can enumerate about 15 of them and have varying knowledge of each.

The creek had an East and a West Branch, one on each side of Kennett Square. Although I don't have direct knowledge of mills in this area, there must have been some; after all, Mill Road follows the West Branch along the west side of the borough. Coming south down the East Branch, the most important mill was Clifton Flour Mill, still an imposing building owned by Dave Taylor. Pillsbury and Pride of Clifton were some of the brands of flour produced in this mill. There is an inside water wheel, most recently operated by Wesley Armstrong in the early 1960s. Coming south from Kennett on the West Branch, there must have been a mill at Springers' farm on Chandler Mill Road, near its junction with Bucktoe Road. Warren Springer married John Becker's daughter, and their son, John A. Springer, was an accomplished machinist and model builder.

John Becker operated two mills fed by a single mill race where Kaolin Road joins Marshalls Bridge Road, still on the West Branch. The grist mill was on the west side of Kaolin Road and the saw mill on the east side. The saw mill building is still standing and has been a residence for many years. John Becker bought a new 1913 Model 76 Stanley from agent T. Clarence Marshall that became the first car in FAHP's present collection in 1940.

The branches came together at Marshalls Bridge, and the Marshall family grist and saw mill, less than 1/4 mile downstream from this junction, became the beginning of the Marshall paper and fibre business (NVF) in 1856. By the time du Pont made his survey, there were two mill sites at Auburn, just over one mile downstream from the Marshalls Bridge mill. Three generations of the Garrett family had operated the original "Auburn Mills," first as a grist and sawmill, then snuff, and finally as an unsuccessful attempt to make paper. In 1813, this mill was sold to Thomas Lea, who converted it to a cotton mill. The buildings now on this site are those of the former Marshall Brothers Paper Company, owned by the State of Delaware adjacent to Auburn Heights. The other mill site was the new (in du Pont's time) Garrett Snuff Mill that expanded and made snuff here until 1954. The Lower Snuff Mill or Tape Mill, another half mile downstream, was not known to du Pont as it was built about 1846.

The grist and flour mill at Ashland was an important business that lasted for 200 years operated by the Gregg, Phillips, and Sharpless families before being taken over by George W. Pusey (who married Florence Sharpless) about 1900. Always powered by the water from Red Clay Creek, the dam washed out in the major flood of 1938, but it was immediately rebuilt, and the mill continued operation until George Pusey's death in 1943. Almost immediately thereafter, the mill was torn down and the mill race bulldozed over so that no trace, except for the dam at the end of Sharpless Road, remains. Ike Mackinson, a local "character" and antiques dealer, ran his business from a mill and adjacent barn on Burrows Run, a tributary of Red Clay Creek. Many of his "customers" were there for the experience, rather than to buy. A homemade sign hung over the door in the 1950s: "I Like Ike."